



The Noun As The Basis For Adjectivization And Verbalization In The Chinese Language

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Abstract: The article explores the process of noun-to-verb conversion in modern Chinese. It examines the structural, syntactic, and semantic mechanisms of nominal-verbal derivation and its relationship with adjectivization. Special attention is given to lexical items that can function simultaneously as nouns, adjectives, and verbs, demonstrating the continuum between parts of speech. Based on the analysis of representative examples, it is shown that the verbalization of nouns in Chinese is primarily syntactic in nature and occurs through zero derivation without affixation.

Keywords: Chinese language, noun-to-verb conversion, verbalization of nouns, adjectivization, semantic shift, zero derivation.

Introduction: The examination of the mechanisms underlying noun-to-verb conversion in the Chinese language necessarily involves placing this phenomenon within a broader typological framework. In particular, it appears essential to compare it with analogous processes observed in other languages. Such a comparative perspective makes it possible to identify both universal and language-specific regularities in the transition from nouns to verbs, as well as to clarify the role of morphological means involved in these processes.

It should be emphasized that in analytically structured languages, such as Chinese, changes in part-of-speech classification are most often realized without the use of overt formal markers. In contrast, in languages with a more developed derivational system (for instance, in English), processes such as suffixation and affixation are frequently employed to mark such transitions.

On this basis, it seems necessary to further consider the

extent to which suffixation and affixation (缀化) may be regarded as factors associated with the mechanisms of noun-to-verb conversion.

你知道怎样维修这种新型的机器吗?

- a. Do you know how to service this new-type machine?
- b. Do you know how to serve this new-type machine?

In the given example, option (a) is the correct one, whereas option (b) is erroneous. The reason lies in the fact that the Chinese verb 维修 (to repair; to maintain) can be rendered in English only by means of the verb service (derived from the noun service — maintenance, servicing), but not by serve (to serve; to attend to), despite the fact that both words ultimately derive from the same root serve.

This example clearly demonstrates that, during the process of conversion from nouns to verbs, the resulting verb does not necessarily retain the semantic core of its source noun. In other words, semantic divergence may occur in the course of derivation. Consequently, service and serve should not be regarded as examples of mutual conversion between a noun and a verb, but rather as independent lexical units with distinct meanings.

From a broader linguistic perspective, it should be noted that, in English, cases of conversion between verbs and nouns (in either direction) may arise as a result of syntactic derivation, where the change in grammatical category is determined by the requirements of syntactic structure rather than by morphological affixation. For instance:

(1) to destruct → destruction — an example of syntactic derivation, in which a verb is converted into a noun;

(2) to work → worker — an example of morphological derivation, where a new word is formed through the addition of an affix and acquires a distinct meaning.

Therefore, noun-to-verb conversion can, in most cases, be characterized as a self-referential or autonomous process, in which the change of part-of-speech category occurs without the addition of derivational morphemes—that is, through zero derivation.

However, it is worth mentioning that some researchers (for instance, Dai Hao-yi, 1997) argue that the phenomenon of noun verbalization does not extend to adjectives. Other scholars, such as Wang Dongmei (2010), admit the inclusion of adjectives, noting that there are cases in which adjectives, when converted into verbs, may express degrees of intensity and perform a predicative function. However, Wang Dongmei still classifies such forms as adjectives,

without distinguishing between the processes of noun-to-verb conversion and noun-to-adjective conversion. From our point of view, such a distinction appears to be essential, since adjectives and verbs belong to different parts of speech and display distinct syntactic properties. Accordingly, the processes of converting nouns into verbs and those of converting nouns into adjectives differ in both their structural nature and their underlying mechanisms of transformation.

This category includes words that can function as verbs without undergoing any formal morphological changes, as well as cases where the distinction between nouns and verbs in their syntactic roles becomes blurred. For this reason, such lexical items rarely attract the attention of researchers as instances of noun-to-verb conversion. It is precisely this group of words that represents genuine cases of nominal-verbal conversion, although such phenomena are relatively rare in Chinese.

The term *zhuǎnzhi* (转指, “semantic reorientation”) as used by Wang Dongmei (2010) differs from the interpretation proposed by Zhu Dexi (1983). In Zhu Dexi’s view, 转指 refers to a shift in the referential category of a word resulting from its transition from one part of speech to another—namely, the formation of a new lexical item through zero derivation or by means of a derivational affix. Typical examples of such shifts include the pairs *piàn—piànzi* (骗—骗子, “to deceive” — “deceiver”) and *biān—biānjí* (编—编辑, “to edit” — “editor”), which, according to the classification proposed by Lu Jiangming (1988), belong to the type of direct word formation (*zhíjiē gòucí*, 直接构词).

An analysis of the classification proposed by Wang Dongmei (2010) demonstrates that, in cases of semantic part-of-speech transition, the most frequent patterns involve shifts from instrumental meanings to actional ones, as well as from resultative meanings to processual interpretations. It is noteworthy that such semantic transformations most commonly occur in monosyllabic nouns, which, after being converted into verbs, tend to exhibit a diachronic tendency toward disyllabic forms in the course of their subsequent development.

The transition of nouns into adjectives may be regarded as one of the intermediate stages in the broader process of noun verbalization; however, it is not identical to it. As noted by Zhang Guoxian (2000) and Zhang Bojiang (1994), there exists a continuum between nouns, adjectives, and verbs, which makes it possible to distinguish adjectives from verbs on a gradual rather than categorical basis.

Our observations suggest that these two grammatical categories differ not only in the semantic direction of

change during adjectivization and verbalization, but also in their formal manifestations. Semantically, the use of nouns in adjectival functions reflects a shift from the expression of an object or entity toward the expression of a property or state. The examples classified by Wang Dongmei (2010) as instances of the “transition from object-denoting to property-denoting meaning” primarily illustrate cases of nominal-adjectival conversion. Nouns, therefore, may be converted either into the class of adjectives or into the class of verbs. Phenomena of this kind, belonging to the domain of nominal-verbal derivation, suggest that one and the same noun may function both adjectivally and verbally, depending on the syntactic and contextual environment.

Among the words that exemplify this phenomenon are, for instance, 毒 (dú, “poison; poisonous; to poison”) and 冰 (bīng, “ice; cold; to freeze”):

1. 毒 — 很毒 — 毒死了 (“poison — very poisonous — poisoned to death”);

2. 冰 — 很冰 — 冰一下水 (“ice — very cold — chill the water”).

In these cases, the nouns 毒 and 冰 demonstrate a high degree of multifunctionality: each is capable of performing nominal, adjectival, and verbal functions. Specifically, 毒 denotes a substance (“poison”) when

used as a noun, expresses a quality (“poisonous”) when used as an adjective, and denotes an action (“to poison”) when used as a verb. Similarly, 冰 functions as a noun meaning “ice,” as an adjective meaning “cold,” and as a verb meaning “to freeze” or “to chill.” It should be noted that certain words in Chinese exhibit dual usage, functioning both as verbs and as nouns. A typical example of this phenomenon is the word “编辑” (biānjí, “to edit; editor”). Generally speaking, such lexical items are regarded as instances of direct word formation (Lu Jiangming, 1988). However, according to Yao Zhenwu (1994), these cases should rather be interpreted as examples of formless nominalization, that is, a conversion process that takes place without the use of explicit morphological markers.

From a linguistic standpoint, previous studies have often treated such words as polyfunctional or multi-category words (兼类词), since their meanings in nominal and verbal usage differ significantly, although both forms clearly derive from the same lexical base. Zhu Dexi (1985) refers to such cases by the term zhuǎnzhi (转指), which literally means “semantic reorientation.” In other words, this type of lexical item cannot be regarded as a typical instance of noun-to-verb conversion, as it already exhibits the characteristics of homonymy. Examples of this category are presented below.

Polyfunctional Word (兼类词)	Noun Usage (名词用法)	Verb Usage (动词用法)
报告 (bàogào)	一个报告 (a report)	报告了 (reported)
报道 (bàodào)	一个报道 (a news report)	报道了 (reported)
考试 (kǎoshì)	一场考试 (an exam)	考过试 (took an exam)
活动 (huódòng)	一个活动 (an event/activity)	活动活动 (to organize/hold an activity)

It can thus be observed that such examples represent a transitional zone between the adjectivization and verbalization of nouns, thereby confirming the existence of a functional and semantic continuum among parts of speech in the Chinese language. The conducted analysis has shown that noun-to-verb conversion in most cases occurs through zero derivation, accompanied by a shift in both the referential and categorical status of the word, without the involvement of any overt morphological affixation.

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